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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BRATISLAVA 000061

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TAGS: PREL PGOV AF SR LY VE LO

SUBJECT: PM FICO'S JANUARY 29 LUNCH WITH THE AMBASSADOR

REF: A. BRATISLAVA 754
1B. BRATISLAVA 21
1C. BRATISLAVA 31
1D. BRATISLAVA 58

Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe M. Vallee for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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11. (C) Summary. PM Robert Fico hosted the Ambassador for a two-hour lunch in his office on January 29. Fico denied that he is moving Slovakia's foreign policy further from the U.S. and agreed to consider or pass along many of the Ambassador's suggestions on energy security and other domestic issues. End summary.

AFGHANISTAN

12. (C) Fico said he had honored his December commitment to the Ambassador to move the Slovak troops to Kandahar (Ref D). Fico expressed amazement at the organization and professionalism of the American management at Kandahar airbase, and said it looked more like a civilian construction site than a warrior's base. Fico opined that the base in Kandahar is safer than Kabul, which he had visited earlier. Fico said he was given assurances by local commanders that there is at least 18 months of work for Slovakia's combat engineers on the base. Fico added that he wants the Kandahar movement to be worked out before moving forward with plans to send Slovaks to a Czech PRT in northern Afghanistan, but that MOD is already investigating PRT options.

PUBLIC PERSONA VS. POLICY

13. (C) The Ambassador noted that the PM's visit to Cuba's National Day reception; his stated opposition to U.S. missile defense assets in Slovakia (comment: the PM responded to a hypothetical question from a Czech reporter - the U.S. has not approached Slovakia about hosting such assets); the delay in Slovakia's decision to move forces to Kandahar; rumors of a trip to Venezuela; and his spokesperson's comments about his own disinterest in the fate of condemned Bulgarian nurses in Libya, all create the illusion of a greater gulf between the U.S. and Slovakia than actual GOS policy demonstrates. Fico responded with a spirited indictment of the press, claiming the media had tried to manipulate his spokesperson to adopt a position beyond his own commitment to convey the EU position on the Bulgarian nurses. Fico said he would never go to Venezuela because the press would put pictures of him, Chavez, and Ahmadinejad together and that would not do - although he thought a photo with Chavez alone would be okay. Fico claimed "rumors" about his planned trip to Venezuela started because Economy Minister Jahnatek was going to see an energy project and the idiot press confused that trip with the PM's separate planned trip to South America. (Comment: FM Jan Kubis told us previously that he had convinced Fico not

to go to Venezuela by bluntly asking if Fico wanted to see photos of himself next to Hugo Chavez and Iranian President Ahmadinejad plastered all over the international media. (Ref C) End comment.)

ENERGY SECURITY

¶ 14. (C) Fico reacted enthusiastically to the Ambassador's suggestion of joint scientific and technical efforts on alternative energy research and American investment. Fico pointed out that he had taken money from his special "slush fund" to fund a visit by technical students to the AgMin State Secretary's methane-to-electricity project near the eastern city of Presov. Fico expressed frustration with the pace at which his ministers were addressing the issue; "the State Forests can't even put together a plan to retrieve the waste wood on the forest floor," and expressed support for wood heat in the villages - although it needs to be made less smoky.

¶ 15. (C) Fico agreed with the Ambassador that the Russians do not/not seem to be acting in good faith on Transpetrol. "They look like they are delaying to run out the clock on our veto rights," Fico said, adding that his early April meeting with Putin would not allow time to resolve the issue. The Ambassador noted that Jahnatek seems to be petrified of the Russians and that Slovakia is in a better position for tough negotiations now than it will be when Russia can ship gas directly to Germany or when the EU's memory of the Belarus shutoff fades. The Ambassador noted that ultimately a court would have to decide whether the Rebgun Yukos or the Theede Yukos had the power to sell the shares, and that Slovakia should hedge its bets by negotiating with Theede and let the court decide. At least the GOS would have fought. Another

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option would be to let the Poles, who are interested, or another party, carry out the legal fight in the Dutch court, with a side deal for all the things Slovakia wanted, with greater share control than they had now. Fico was intrigued, noting he still prefers a Slovak buyback of shares. Fico said he would talk to Jahnatek about other options.

PM,S FUTURE PLANS

¶ 16. (C) Fico said he would not stand for PM again in 2010, when his proposal to split the Smer party chairmanship from the Premiership would go into effect. The Ambassador marveled that there has been no press on the stated decision not to run, since Fico had told the notoriously gossipy diplomatic corps the same thing at Christmas-time. Fico noted that the press have known about his idea of splitting the Smer Chairmanship from the premiership since December, but have only now begun to comment on his "not being able to handle both jobs."

CHURCH AND STATE

¶ 17. (C) Fico said he would be meeting with Cardinal Korec to reconfirm Smer's agreement with the Church that neither side will bring up divisive social issues (i.e. homosexual partnerships, abortion, the law on conscientious objection). The Ambassador asked if the Smer/HZDS deputies' proposal to require the signature of 20,000 believers (as opposed to signatures of mere supporters) for the registration of new religions breached that agreement. Fico first emphasized that the proposal was not made by the government, and then noted that the intent is to stop groups from getting signatures from "students who will sign anything" and thereby to prevent the registration of Islam. The Ambassador urged greater openness on the religious registration issue. Fico said he would discuss it with Minister of Culture Marek Madaric. (Comment. Fico made an oblique reference to Archbishop Sokol when he noted that Korec is a Cardinal and not "a troublesome Archbishop." Sokol recently made troubling comments in favor of the WWII-era fascist Slovak state. (Ref B) End comment.)

¶ 8. (C) Fico claimed that right-wing opposition parties KDH and SDKU never send representatives to commemorations of the 1944 Slovak National Uprising because they are beholden to Catholics with a positive view of the Slovak fascist leader Joseph Tiso, and that he is always alone at events commemorating the holocaust. (Comment. Poloffs have met officials of both KDH and SDKU at official commemorations of the Slovak National Uprising and Holocaust. End comment.)

THE MALINOVA CASE

¶ 9. (C) The Ambassador noted rumors, disturbing because they come from several unconnected sources, that Hedviga Malinova has been subject to harassment, including a break-in at her apartment and confrontations with shady figures who showed her pictures of the break-in. (Comment. Malinova is an ethnic-Hungarian student who claims to have been assaulted by skin-heads in August. The PM and IntMin have both publicly discredited her account of the incident (Ref A). End comment) The Ambassador noted that it would be disturbing if such harassment was state sanctioned and that, if not, the police should be looking into it. Fico said he had also heard such rumors, but that if the harassment were state sanctioned the Hungarians would have been all over the government, and that the Hungarian PM has assured him the Malinova case is closed. Fico promised, however, to ask Interior Minister Robert Kalinak to look into the allegations.

SLOVAK INFORMATION SERVICE

¶ 10. (C) Fico said that HZDS nominee Kafka was absolutely not the right person for the number two position at SIS and that there has been a lot of tension with HZDS on this issue. Fico hopes Meciar can be convinced to nominate current Ambassador to NATO Igor Slobodnik, who has HZDS connections. Fico even said he was going to tell Meciar he didn't like Slobodnik, in the belief that would help Meciar to appreciate Slobodnik more.

KOSOVO

¶ 11. (C) Fico's impression is that Europe is not united on Kosovo, and consensus will be difficult to find, though in the end, Britain, Germany, and France would force something through. Fico added that "we central Europeans are still second class citizens - these EU leadership meetings are completely worthless." Fico said he will not act as an impediment to EU consensus and asked "why would I want

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Slovakia to stand out by itself?" He does, however, feel strongly that the Serbs should not be humiliated. Fico claimed not to be sure of his coalition partner's positions on Kosovo. (Comment. Kubis told the Ambassador he had met with SNS leader Jan Slota, and that Slota is adamantly against Kosovar independence. Kubis is hoping to get passive resistance rather than active opposition but had no response yet. End comment.) Strangely, Fico thinks Poland could be a problem on Kosovo.

VALLEE